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ABSTRACT

A study compared students' ability to read their stories written with invented spellings with their ability to reread their stories rewritten with conventional spellings. Fourteen first graders wrote stories using invented spelling and read the text aloud. The stories were then transcribed into conventional text by an adult and reread by the students. Readings were evaluated, using the Goodman-Burke Miscue Analysis, to determine which of the two versions produced the fewest miscue errors. Results indicated that most categories of miscue errors were very close in number, giving no strong indication that either invented spelling or conventional text is an easier format for children to read. When children were divided according to those who performed best in each format, the results showed that nine had fewer miscues on their invented spelling readings, while five had fewer miscues on the conventional spelling versions of their texts. The results suggest that children pass through various stages when learning to read and write, one of which is invented spelling. Use of invented spelling did not appear to hinder children from moving to conventional spellings when ready. (HTH)

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FINAL REPORT

1985 TEACHER-RESEARCHER GRANT

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

FIRST GRADERS' ABILITY TO READ THEIR CREATIVE WRITING

(INVENTED SPELLING VERSUS CONVENTIONAL TEXT)

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AUGUST 15, 1986

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Research Question and Conclusion

This research involved fourteen First Graders writing stories in invented spelling and reading the text. The story was then transcribed into conventional text by an adult and re-read.

The research question was to determine which type of text (invented spelling versus conventional text) produced the fewest number of miscue errors. The Goodman-Burke Miscue Analysis was used.

The conclusions show that children pass through various stages when learning to read and write. Using invented spelling is one of the stages along the continuum. Using invented spelling does not hinder children from moving to conventional text when ready.

Teaching in a whole-language First Grade and using literature as a source of reading instruction as well as language and shared book experiences has always provided a rich source of children's writing. These pieces of writing have always been of great interest and wonder to me. My own research questions concerning writing grew as my commitment to the writing process in the early grades blossomed.

Attending NCTE Teacher-Researcher sessions at which Lucy Calkins and Nancie Atwell presided gave me impetus to look at myself as a researcher within my classroom and to accept the responsibility for professional growth in this area. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of Dr. Diane DeFord, Ohio State University, from whose research, teaching style and provocative questions I have learned so much about writing and the research process.

Knowing how closely the reading-writing processes are connected, I questioned what happens when I transcribe children's invented spelling into conventional text and ask them to read this same piece of writing. Are children able to read their invented spelling better than their words that have been transcribed? After an adult has acted upon children's writing is it still enough of their own that they can readily read it, or has it too become part of all those other unfamiliar words?

In many discussions with other teachers as well as parents and skeptics, the question of the validity of encouraging invented spelling had been raised. As our school became more committed to the writing process as a continuous curriculum, the second grade teachers noticed considerable differences in the way transfer students with no writing background attacked a writing problem compared to those who had a year of writing experience in our first grade. It seemed apparent that these new second graders acted as new first graders (using a very controlled vocabulary

no risk-taking, few spelling strategies, depending on the teacher for spelling and erasing).

As a recipient of this grant, I had the opportunity to explore my questions concerning writing and to raise many more for myself and others to consider. The research procedure had a contextual design in which, based on my questions from previous experience with beginning readers, I explored what happens when adults act upon a child's work.

The students included in the study were chosen based on informal testing of the number of basic sight words known, abilities on the Book-Handling test (Clay, Goodman,Altwerger,Deford), number of words the child could write and my general recognition of this student as a beginning reader. The fourteen children chosen knew an average of 5.2 basic sight words, wrote an average of 4.2 words and were identified as needing pre-primer type reading materials. Three needed help reciting the alphabet and seven needed help with book-handling tasks. Twelve were boys and two were girls. The age range was 6 years, 2 months to 7 years. The average age was 6 years, 7 months, which was also the average age of the class.

The procedure used in my research was as follows. With a research aide as an observer, each student drew pictures and wrote a story in his/her own handwriting using invented spelling. He/She was then tape recorded reading this story. The research aide immediately typed the story in conventional text on a primary typewriter, stapled the pages into a book format and tape recorded the child reading again. The children illustrated the books later in the classroom. These books became a source of reading material for the children. Pertinent notes were also made by the research aide. These were often clues for me about how the session went, about a particular skill a child was using or about a problem area. A total of seventy sessions were

held with the fourteen students who wrote 3-7 books each between September and April of the 1985-86 school year. The Miscue Analysis (Goodman,Burke) was used in a modified way to interpret the data in both the invented spelling and the conventional text formats.

Comparison of Miscues

	Invented Spellings	Conventional Text
Substitutions	35	39
Omissions	28	27
Insertions	11	10
Reversals	2	1
Repetition-Correcting	12	8
Repetition-Unsuccessful correction	0	5
Repetition-Anticipating	14	16
Long Pauses	6	10
Separating syllables	1	7
Added categories		
Hesitating	4	4
Relying on Memory	1	8
Research Aide providing word	1	3

Most categories of miscue errors are very close in number. Therefore, no strong indication for either invented spelling or conventional text seems apparent as far as the easier format for children to read.

However, reviewing the data and dividing the children based on those who perform best in each format provides much information about individual children and their stages of development and understanding of print.

Of the fourteen children surveyed, nine had fewer miscues on their own invented spelling readings. Five children performed better (fewer miscues) on their stories in conventional text.

The children's number of miscues was compared. The most drastic example showed Matthew with 16 miscues when reading his invented spelling and 29 miscues when reading his conventional text. The reverse was Ben with 19 miscues on invented spelling and 8 on conventional text. Some children were almost equally comfortable with conventional text or invented spelling. Ryan B. had 8 miscues on invented spellings and 9 on conventional text. Tommy with the reverse had 9 miscues on invented spellings and 8 on conventional text. Most children were in a range of 2-6 miscues difference. The average difference between the number of miscues was 4.9 for those having more success on invented spelling and 4.8 for those students who succeeded best with conventional text.

Since the average number of miscues (4.9 for invented spelling compared to 4.8 for conventional text) is very close this result suggests that children pass through various stages when learning to read and write. The logical implication is that the children were on different levels of development even in the beginning stages of reading. For me, the need for each child to grow at his/her own pace and become familiar with the world of print through encounters with invented spellings, a child's own interpretation of this world of print, becomes even more paramount.

The children who found invented spellings easier to read were the very beginning readers in this class and the ones who needed help with the alphabet and book handling. These nine children form Group A on the following chart. Group B of 5 children had fewer miscues on conventional text.

Comparison of Groups Based on Results of Informal Testing, August, 1985

	GROUP A Invented Spelling	GROUP B Conventional Text
Need Pre-Primer Material	6	1
Need help with alphabet	3	0
Need help with Book-handling	6	1
Number of words written	4.7	4.2
Basic sight words known	5.2	5.0

Results of Research Sessions

Difference between number of miscues comparing invented spellings to conventional text-average per child	4.9	4.8
Average miscues with invented spellings	6.6	11
Average miscues with conventional text	11.66	6.4

An inverse relationship exists between Group A and Group B when comparing the average number of miscues. Those children who displayed the least sophisticated mechanisms for handling print performed best on their own invented spelling (6.6 compared to 11 miscues). The conventional text was still "foreign" to them. Transcription to conventional text of their writing created a situation in which the child had less success. Those children who had a better sense of print and were more experienced had a more difficult time with their invented spellings (11.6 compared to 6.4). At this point they were looking for and recognizing print that was conventional. This information also strengthens my belief in the stages that children engage in when learning to read and write.

In conclusion, my sense is that these students are moving along a continuum of learning to cope with print. Since there is almost parity in the number of miscues made and in the average of miscues made when comparing invented spelling and conventional text, this is a strong indication that children, when ready, move from their invented spelling to conventional text and are not hindered by the use of invented spellings. The children seemed to respond better to either invented spellings or conventional text depending on where they are in the developmental stages. I include here for reference Diane DeFord's Stages of Writing Development.

1. Scribbling
2. Differentiation between drawing and writing
3. Concepts of linearity, uniformity, inner complexity, symmetry, placement, left-to-right motion, and top to bottom directionality
4. Development of letters and letter-like shapes
5. Combination of letters, possibly with spaces, indicating understanding of units (letters, words, sentences), but may not show letter/sound correspondence.
6. Writing known isolated words - developing sound/letter correspondence
7. Writing simple sentences with use of invented spellings
8. Combining two or more sentences to express complete thoughts
9. Control of punctuation - periods, capitalization, use of upper and lower case letters
10. Form of discourse - stories, information material, letters, etc.

The invented spelling group began the year in Stages 5-6 and progressed to Stage 8. One of the students in conventional text began the year in Stage 5 and progressed to Stage 8. Most of the conventional text group were in Stage 6 and moved to Stage 8. All children moved in and out of these stages depending on the task and the situation. None of them had control of punctuation (Stage 9) at the end of the year. All children had freely explored writing activities as in Stage 10.

Implications for the Teacher

It seems there is no point in insisting that all children use conventional text when writing. This only slows idea generation and the knowledge we gain by observing a child produce a word. On the other hand, children should not be held back by only using invented spellings. It seems evident that children do move from one to the other when given the opportunity to write and to read their writing. Our second grade teacher's experience with transfer students seems to indicate that.

Consider the reasons why we encourage invented spelling in our classrooms. It allows children to be risk-takers, to try different spelling strategies and to practice the ones they know. Invented spelling speeds the process from idea to pictures to print. Children have opportunities to try-out, to model writing and communication as they build confidence. Consider invented spelling a way-station along the path to formal writing. For the teacher, invented spelling is a freeing agent; the children are not dependent on you for every spelling. Invented spelling is also a very indicative diagnostic tool. It is possible to chart a child's growth in your class much as Glenda Bissex did with her son in GYNS AT WK. During the course of a writing session many students would decide on an invented spelling for a word and then very consistently spell the word the same throughout that piece of writing. This demonstrates their understanding that there are correct, consistent spellings for words and that there are spelling rules to be adhered to.

When children are ready, resources such as dictionaries, thesauri, word charts, etc. should be made available. As a teacher who considers herself a guide, one who wants to be alert to the developmental stages of each student,

I want to encourage other teachers to be risk-takers too, and encourage them to not be afraid of invented spelling. We must look for signs of growth and change. When children are having more success with conventional text, their invented spelling can be transcribed to make more reading materials available to them. These are very special reading materials, those that the children have written themselves and which are closer to them than any other available reading materials. The clue is to watch for those signs that show a child is ready to move to conventional text and then provide those materials as well as trade books, magazines, etc.

My sense from the study is that children are going to move along the continuum from stringed letters, to invented spelling to conventional text at their own pace. We as teachers can provide the opportunities and guidance necessary to make these transition smooth and at the appropriate times if we are willing to be risk-takers ourselves and be alert to our students' needs. Be aware that these stages are not static. Children fluctuate back and forth within the stages depending on many factors. If we consider all the ways we are empowering these young children by encouraging them to work through their encounters with print, we can only be proud that we have done our job.

I share these two examples with you as evidence of how important it is to not just allow students to write, but to be the facilitator for your students to bring them to literacy.

Jacob's Halloween story consisted of two sentences and a title. "Scary Halloween. Scary Halloween is going away. Have fun!" As I listened to him on the tape reading his invented spelling script, his voice was scary and he cackled at the end. Moments later when he read the same two lines in conventional

text, there was not even the slightest hint that this was a Halloween story. Jacob's voice was deadpan. The conventional text no longer was his story. Although during the course of the year, Jacob became an excellent reader and had no difficulty with First Grade materials, he still had fewer miscues when reading his invented spelling. Why? These stories, I feel, were his own. He was closer to them. He recognized them and thus made fewer errors.

In another example, Michelle, who used invented spelling more successfully, chose to describe our lunch program in her research session. She wrote three lines and was prepared to tape record her invented spelling text when she read through again and determined that another reader would not fully understand how the program worked from her description. She proceeded to add two more lines. A First Grader revising her work unsolicited. This child had already developed a sense of audience. She was aware that language is communication. She had a responsibility to make her written communication clear to any reader and most of all she had a desire to bring meaning to her work. She wanted others to know and understand what she had written. She had discovered that writing is thinking. Michelle is well on the way to being a communicator because she has been given confidence in her abilities through writing opportunities and invented spelling.

I feel these insights about individual children can only come when children are given the freedom to write and the encouragement to write. No amount of lecturing or didactic teaching could produce the same results in the early years. Children need to be participants in their early learning. Teachers need to relax, enjoy, grow with the students and finally, form support groups to help each other.

Implication for further research/Difficulty with the research procedure

I am concerned about how much research information I missed by relegating the story-generating and taping to a research aide. Although I have many notes from the aide, I feel I missed many opportunities to follow each child's thinking processes. Due to class size though, a research aide was the only way to accomplish the sessions.

Knowing how difficult the physical procedure of writing can be for some young children, I question how this affected the length of their pieces of writing. I agree with Marie Clay and others that the children who are intent on delivering a message will work through their motor skill problems persistently. I also see that this slow, ponderous process is a great aide in a child's language development and in our opportunities to detect problem areas. However, I still question what affect it may have had on the length of their writing.

Another question lies with the possibility of fewer miscues if the children had read their invented spelling text from a typed page rather than their handwriting. Or again, is the piece of work so much their own (in their handwriting) that they recognize the words better than if they have to "translate" to standardized letter forms in small typewriter print?

It would be interesting to replicate the study using computer terminals and print-outs of the children's stories. What part would typing compared to writing in long-hand play in ease of story generation? The print-out would also be in a standardized letter format yet still in invented spelling.

I question the part memory played in the reading of their stories for the taping session. The research aide and I both noted if we felt memory was affecting the reading of the story. Sometimes a picture clue would jog a

memory - an acceptable technique for a beginning reader, but difficult to tell what effect that may have had on the research.

Can we move children faster into conventional text by putting more of their invented spelling into conventional text? I'm not sure. I have the sense it is a very individual thing and that children will move as they are ready. However, we need to be there to facilitate that move.

Further Dissemination of this Research Report

I will be speaking at the Ohio Council Teachers of English and Language Arts/Ohio Department of Education conference, "Writing Conference for Teachers, Teachers Sharing with Teachers", September 28-29, 1986. I plan to discuss the role of teacher-researcher as well as the NCTE grants, to describe a whole-language classroom, my research project and finally the implications I see for the classroom. I am extremely proud to say that Nancie Atwell will be the keynote speaker at this conference.

I am also preparing a similar report of this project for submission to the ERIC clearinghouse.

Comments

This research grant has opened a whole new world of opportunities for me and has encouraged me to look at my teaching in a whole new light. I sincerely and respectfully accept the responsibility to pass this light to others.

Recommended Professional Books

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